

Calligraphy, Sculpture, and Painting are One, But Sometimes Two or Three

Jerome Silbergeld

Few art historical careers can match that of Wen Fong. Born in Shanghai in 1930, he was a prodigy of traditional Chinese calligraphy and was home tutored. Like the children of many of Shanghai's well-educated families at that time, he was directed toward a modern career and was sent to Jiaotong University to study engineering. But in 1948 he came to America, to Princeton University, to escape the fate of having to study college physics — his “recurrent nightmare,” as he puts it — which he was failing at Jiaotong for lack of enthusiasm. At Princeton he became a student of European art history. A budding medievalist and a student of George Rowley (a medievalist who also thought deeply and wrote thoughtfully about Chinese art¹), Fong switched to Chinese art history at the time he was to begin his dissertation research. Following Rowley's suggestion, he traded his intended theme of Christian angels for that of Buddhist luohans. This eventually became Fong's pioneering study of the famous Daitokuji set of twelfth-century luohan paintings, originally one hundred scrolls, each depicting five luohans in a landscape setting. In this, Fong broke new ground by using Western art historical methods to analyze Buddhist painting styles (a topic revisited in Chapter 5 in this volume). Since that time, investigating Chinese art historical subjects with Western methodologies and goals has been Wen Fong's central academic mission: giving Chinese painting its own history — beyond the traditional Chinese classification of painters by typological “schools” and lineage from past masters — by analyzing style with a detailed, descriptive language of visual form and demonstrating how the history of styles constitutes an important and revealing aspect of cultural history.

Teaching at Princeton for half a century, Wen Fong founded the country's first doctoral program in Chinese and Japanese art and archaeology and graduated more than thirty of his own students. These students have occupied many, if not most, of the major teaching and museum positions in the United States, Europe, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, distributing Wen

¹ Rowley's *Principles of Chinese Painting* was the first book I ever read on the subject, and whatever its sinological flaws it remains for me one of the most intellectually engaging introductions to the subject that I have read.

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Fong's "academic DNA" through multiple generations of grand-students and great-grand-students.

For most of that time, Wen Fong served also as faculty curator of East Asian art at Princeton University's art museum, where he developed an extraordinary study collection of Chinese painting and a Chinese calligraphy collection that is unsurpassed outside Asia.² Some two decades into his teaching career, he became the consultative chairman of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of Asian Art. At a time when it was considered too late to do much about the Metropolitan's mediocre collection of Chinese painting and calligraphy, Fong helped build one of the finest museum collections in these two media anywhere in America.³ A reflection of his deep engagement both in library research and in gallery exhibitions, Fong's bibliography of publications eventually grew to more than twenty-five books (authored and coauthored, edited and coedited) and more than seventy-five articles and chapters or portions of books.⁴ His readership and scholarly influence have reached far beyond those in the field of Asian art. The College Art Association presented him with its annual distinguished teaching award in 1998 and its distinguished scholar award in 2013.

Of this rare double career, one might wonder whether Wen Fong was more the academician or the museum curator. One way or the other, he was always a thoroughly committed teacher. Teaching the public was ever-present in his curatorial work, just as museum acquisitions became the regular subject of his seminar sessions and his students' dissertations. His dominant concern was to establish a sequence of authenticated works from which to develop an accurate history of the media of Chinese painting and calligraphy. Professor Fong himself (and likewise his wife, Connie) often said of his writings that they changed little over the years and were all pretty much the same, only illustrated with different examples. After all, he claims, there is really only one story, one history. His students were reminded regularly that "the object is always right" and that the truth about it was obtainable. In reality, while he has been strikingly persistent in his basic views, Wen Fong has never been reluctant to change his view on particulars when the evidence suggested or demanded it. The intellectual conflict of art history versus sinology, which flared up during the

2 See, for example, Fu and Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship*; Fong, *Images of the Mind*; Harrist and Fong, *The Embodied Image*.

3 See Fong with Fu, *Sung and Yuan Paintings*; Fong, *Beyond Representation*.

4 For a bibliography of Wen Fong's publications, complete through 2011, see Silbergeld et al., *Bridges to Heaven* 1: 53–63.

1950s, was, he believed early on, an empty debate. He recognized that both connoisseurial and sinological skills were essential to a mature practice of the discipline. Over the decades, he has increasingly enriched his own studies with political, economic, or psychological dimensions, yet he has always been foremost a formalist, a stylist, and a positivist, and even now he often dismisses studies that are too contextual or too historiographic — not enough concerned with style “as an artist must be” — as mere “anthropology.” Art, insists Wen Fong, *is* history. Each work of art has its own history, which begins with the artist’s first move and ends with his last; each work is one moment in a historical sequence of such moments and such works.

The eight chapters in this volume revisit Fong’s favorite subjects and the chief themes of his teaching, writing, and curatorial career, and each offers his updated views about them:

- art as history, each art object preserving a moment in art’s own significant history, not as some lesser appendage of other histories and contingent upon or a mere illustration of them;
- the museum as a place of serious study and education;
- the primacy of calligraphy and painting as “fine arts” among all the artistic media in China, and the close historical relationship between them;
- the parallel development of representational skills in painting and sculpture in the early history of Chinese art;
- the paramount significance of brushwork in later painting history, seen abstractly as a means of personal expression by the artist rather than of representational skills or goals;
- the paradigmatic importance of the master-to-follower lineage — genealogy not as a substitute for stylistic history but as a social force, shaping the continuity and directing the subtly nuanced changes in Chinese painting history down through the ages;
- the important role of collecting and collectors in helping to establish what constitutes “art,” and in continuously shaping and reshaping what we know of the art historical past;
- the critical necessity of analytically securing “indubitably authenticated” works as the foundation for an accurate history of art.

For Wen Fong, these are the fundamentals, and they in turn, in each of these eight thematic chapter presentations, raise issues that all readers will want to think about in their own way.

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The first chapter, on the close relation between calligraphy and painting, is perhaps the broadest in its concerns, yet in some ways the most challenging. Like many a Wen Fong lecture, as his graduate students soon came to realize, this chapter is knowledgeably embroidered with enough surface detail that one may be challenged to recognize the dense cultural strands from which the underlying fabric is woven. Those strands have their own logic, threading through time and through comparisons of material and conceptual media — a fine example, perhaps, of holistic Chinese thought — and requiring, here, some repetition from chapter to chapter when applied to new topics. But this is not ordinary repetition. It is as if one were listening to a discussion in premodern times among a traditional critic of Chinese painting and calligraphy, a physician, a geographer (or *fengshui* master), and an intellectual historian: each would emerge with a different perspective in what would begin as a circular discussion, but even as each emphasized details from their own specialization, all would eventually meet comfortably in the center with a common language and broadly shared patterns of thought.

The pairing of painting with calligraphy is one of considerable antiquity. China's first great painting historian and perhaps its greatest, Zhang Yanyuan of the ninth century, began his massive study with just such an observation, pointing to their remotest origins: painting and writing arose as one, "from Nature itself and not from human contrivance ... alike in form, and not yet differentiated," and only afterward did they part, in the course of human endeavor.⁵ This much, of course, is not history but legend, and whether Zhang entirely believed this or not, one cannot know. Lodged in this equation of the two media is the notion that Chinese characters are pictorial, which is only partially true.⁶ Still more fundamental to this belief was its emphasis on the physical and emotional aspects of Chinese brushwork, as shared by painting and calligraphy: an emphasis on the distinctive kinesthetics of the brush and on the critical prioritization of process over product, of fabrication over fabric, of artistic expression over accurate representation of subject matter, of spontaneity and "naturalness" over technical skill, and (as in the martial arts) of mind over matter. These were not the dominant preferences at all times and were attached primarily to literati notions that gradually gained ascendancy from the late eleventh century onward. Here, some major qualification is needed, if actuality is to approximate critical ideals. Lest we think of calligraphy as a wholly untrammelled

5 Cf. Acker, *Some Tang and Pre-Tang Texts* 1: 61, 64.

6 See Boltz, "Early Chinese Writing."

exercise, we must emphasize that the practice of artistic writing with the brush has its own methods, its own slowly and very deliberately developed skills. Such skills were attained traditionally from practice in childhood onward, based not on undisciplined spontaneity but on painstaking years of copy work that closely followed calligraphic models from selected ancient masters. In calligraphy, one trained by repetitive imitation until every twist and turn of the brush, every motion of the model, was mastered, felt comfortable and natural, and then spontaneity could begin to emerge and imitation could turn to emulation.

Such was the irony, the inner tension of the calligraphic practice: one gave up freedom in order to attain freedom. A classic Confucian aphorism, from the *Analects*, suits this situation well:

The Master said: At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty I had planted my feet firmly upon the ground. At forty I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty I heard them with docile ear. At seventy I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of what was right.⁷

A parallel to poetry can similarly be drawn: just as poetry was regularly compared to calligraphy, so Chinese painting was regularly compared to poetry by literati writers, beginning in the late eleventh century. As Guo Xi put it at that time, quoting unnamed predecessors, “A poem is a painting without form, and a painting is a poem with form. Wise men often talked of this, and it has been our guide.”⁸ Today we appreciate that poetry and painting have their significant differences, that they are really quite different media and are both the better for it. They complement each other with these differences rather than falling prey to redundancy.⁹ When Wen Fong writes that “calligraphy and painting are one,” he, too, does not mean for this to be taken as an identity or an equation but rather as a match — like a well-suited couple in strong support of each other. And as between calligraphy and painting, so, too, with poetry. Shared features existed between all three: no matter what was proclaimed about easygoing spontaneity, discipline and method were ever-present, and ease came only with the arrival of maturity; in all, discipline was based on the mastery of past

⁷ Confucius, *Analects*, 88.

⁸ Bush and Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting*, 158.

⁹ See, for example, Edwards, “Painting and Poetry in the Late Sung”; and Chaves, “Meaning Beyond the Painting.”

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models, of one's own chosen "great masters." Chinese poetry bore little resemblance to free verse, to unrhymed and unmetred prose read slowly with heavy pauses that goes by the name of poetry. The disciplined use of rhyme and meter required a vast vocabulary, as pronounced in earlier (Tang) times and, at least in regulated verse, a disciplined musicality as achieved through a set number of formally structured tonal patterns. Often a poem's schema followed the template of famous early models, as poets present gamely matched wits with poets past; even more challenging was spontaneously matching verse with other poems freshly composed. The modern Western identification of poetry with "license" bears little resemblance to the conventions of traditional Chinese poetry.

Chinese painters, calligraphers, and poets all bowed before a preferred lineage of past masters, selected on the basis of numerous subtle factors, including aesthetics, geographic affiliation, class affinity, personal temperament, and the accident of availability. Rather than subscribing to any totalizing originality, an artist might have hoped to become an extension of that genealogy of past styles, to become a regular member of the "family." The time-honored Six Canons by which a painter should earn his merit, composed by the fifth-century painter and critic Xie He, installed as its concluding criterion the matter of how well the artist had trained by his copying of models. To copy was to demonstrate respect for the model; to be copied was a demonstration that one had arrived. The artist extended the longevity of the artistic clan and added to its ongoing vitality by contributing something new to it— but no more than some small fraction of the whole. Only a rare artistic genius or a fool would presume to possess a greater degree of originality than that. One such genius was Dong Qichang of the early seventeenth century, and even he had this to say in one of his more humble moments: "Someone has said that each one must form his own school, but that is not right.... Who can abandon the old methods and create new ones quite independently?"¹⁰

From this cultural embrace of such deliberate copy work, an attitude toward imitation and originality emerged that was very different from that which we attribute to Europe in recent centuries. Old and deteriorating paintings and calligraphies, if sufficiently valued, were carefully copied and renewed, and it was but a short step from there to forgery. Some of China's leading painters practiced such forgery either by imitating or copying the works of others (see especially Chapter 8) or by having their "own" works produced by hired hands (*daibi*, "substitute brushes" or ghost-painters) for

¹⁰ Sirén, *Chinese on the Art of Painting*, 143.

sale or exchange.¹¹ Wen Fong summed up this attitude in a 1962 article, “The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting”:

The ability to create a perfect forgery ... was a matter of virtuosity and pride. The legal or ethical problems of an “honest business transaction” never entered into the picture. As a matter of fact, it was precisely for very good reasons of ethics and even better ones of tact, that the owner of a forgery was usually protected, as far as possible, from knowing the truth.... If someone is gullible enough to buy as well as derive pleasure from forgeries, why spoil the poor man’s illusions?¹²

Still, the Chinese have long differentiated the varied contexts in which copy work was generated and have distinguished between innocent copy work and outright forgery. To quote Fong again:

There are copies, imitations, or downright fakes that were made at dates considerably later than that in which the intended artist had lived. There are “studio” products, contemporary imitations, or minor works of the period which had been erroneously attributed — either by mistake, by wishful thinking, or as a result of some dealer’s dishonest manipulation — to great masters. There are relatively unimportant works of a later period with forged inscriptions or colophons added to make them appear much earlier. Finally, there are partial forgeries, like altered or over-restored pictures, and — a unique Chinese invention — stripped or peeled paintings.¹³

The attendant Chinese terminology includes various critical words that cover this territory: *mu*, to trace; *lin*, to make a freehand close copy; and, most important, *fang*, to imitate creatively, to paint in the style of.¹⁴ Most of these terms represent painting practices that were entirely legitimate as aids to study and preservation in a culture where ancestral veneration was as strong in the visual arts as it was in the shrine and the household.

11 Bickford, “Huizong’s Paintings,” 453–513; Bickford, “Visual Evidence Is Evidence,” 85–90.

12 Fong, “Problem of Forgeries,” 99. For more on the subject, see Loehr, “Chinese Paintings with Sung Dated Inscriptions.”

13 Fong, “Problem of Forgeries,” 102.

14 Fong, “Problem of Forgeries,” 105.

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There was yet another, still deeper reason why an ethical constraint against copy work rarely entered the picture: philosophically, in Chinese ontology *everything* in this material world is a replica or likeness of its *xiang*, its original, pre-formed counterpart in the immaterial Dao, in something like a metaphysical mold-model relationship.¹⁵ With *everything* being something *in the style of* something previous, of something else, the distinction between original and fake tended to shrink, if not totally collapse. True, Chinese painting critics regularly spoke of fakery and authenticity (*jiade* and *zhende*), but this distinction has never — not even now¹⁶ — carried the same weight as its equivalent in Western culture.

Out of this pattern of daily practice and attitudes toward historical precedent emerged a history that was ill-disposed toward any radical abandonment of the past and instead was conservatively shaped by slow, evolutionary change, often hard to perceive within any single life span and episodically punctuated by a pattern of historically conscious revivals (*fugu*). Such periodic revivals were the Chinese counterpart of those distinctive historical departures that in Europe led from Romanesque to Gothic to Renaissance to Baroque to Romantic to modernism, and like the Renaissance they often moved “forward” while looking to the past. As Wen Fong writes here in Chapter 1:

The historical pattern seen by Chinese artists was not one of progress in which the new replaced the old; rather, it was viewed as an enduring effort on the part of succeeding generations of artists to gain or restore life and truth to art.¹⁷

Similarly, in the best of Chinese rhetoric, one made no claim to originality but labeled one’s ideas as self-evident and time-honored. No one put this better or with greater authority than Confucius himself: “I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own. I have been faithful to and loved the Ancients.”¹⁸ The philosopher Mozi of the fifth century BCE put it even more succinctly: “A gentleman does not make anything up; he merely transmits.”¹⁹ The fifth-century artist Zong Bing, in China’s earliest major treatise on landscape painting, followed the same

15 See Chapter 6 in this volume. For more on ontology as it relates to Chinese art theory, see also John Hay, “Values and History”; Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*; Bickford, “Huizong and the Aesthetic of Agency”; Silbergeld, “Re-reading Zong Bing.”

16 W. Wong, *Van Gogh on Demand*.

17 See Chapter 1, p. 38, in this volume.

18 Confucius, *Analects*, 122, slightly modified.

19 Confucius, *Analects*, 122n1.

rhetorical principle, claiming cultural territory for this emergent genre by analogizing it to the already deeply established reverence for writing.²⁰

From the profoundly confusing consequences of centuries of Chinese copy work and imitation emerges the modern art historian's connoisseurial urge to undo the authorial tangle that we face today. Outright forgeries are only part of the connoisseur's problem, and perhaps the lesser part. Preservation was at least as important a motivating force as trickery in the production of careful copies. While the Chinese have done a remarkable job of preserving ancient paintings dating back to the tenth century or earlier, many of these survive only as copies of the highest order, difficult today to disentangle from originals and virtually impossible to provide with accurate dates of execution.²¹

There are still other implications of the close relationship between painting and calligraphy. One is a tension between two- and three-dimensionality, between representational illusion and the painter's recognition of his own illusionism. Hence calligraphy and sculpture could be seen as exerting opposing influences on the trajectory taken by the development of painting, and that history went both ways, sometimes at once. Especially as noted in Chapter 3, before calligraphy began to exert its fullest influence on painting from the eleventh century on, painting and sculpture went through a long-term parallel pursuit of more effective renderings of forms in space. This meant that over the centuries before that, while sculptors were gradually providing human and animal figures with a greater degree of naturalism through the increased twisting and turning of ever weightier weight-bearing figures — which Fong refers to as an “awakening” from a “frozen” spaceless past and analogizes to the “miracle” of Greek sculpture as it evolved from archaic to classical²² — Chinese painters were learning how to dramatically enhance the illusion of objects realistically represented on the two-dimensional surface of silk and paper. It is not easy to say what compelled this particular trajectory over such a long time period. Fong subscribes to Ernst Gombrich's view of “schema and correction.” Yet it is not that the artists of any one generation could somehow imagine themselves as teleologically advancing the goals of some future generations. But, still, by the ninth century Zhang Yanyuan could look back over some six centuries and exclaim:

20 Silbergeld, “Re-reading Zong Bing.”

21 Bickford, “Visual Evidence,” 85–90.

22 See Chapter 1, p. 40, in this volume. Of course, whether one considers this “Greek miracle” a miracle is, of course, personal. Subjectively, I prefer sculpture of the Greek archaic period to that of the Greek and Roman classical period and personally regard this history as one of aesthetic decline into a somewhat bland idealism and, finally, vulgarity.

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I have seen well-known works passed down from the Wei and Jin dynasties. In their paintings of mountains and water, the peaks are tightly packed like hair ornaments or the teeth of a rhinoceros-horn comb. Sometimes the waters have no depth to float a ship; sometimes people are drawn larger than the mountains.... Their trees are lined up with outstretched arms and wide-spread fingers.²³

As Wen Fong (along with many other writers) also notes, even before the end of the period when representational naturalism had reached its highest pitch, the eleventh-century painter-calligrapher-poet-critic-scholar-official Su Shi realized that naturalistic representation alone was not enough to assure a good work; and, in a famous pair of poems, he wrote that to judge a painting otherwise was to see only “with the insight of a child.” For him, even a well-chosen dot of color handled just the right way could make all the difference between good work and mere mediocrity.²⁴ This does not mean that Su found anything wrong with representational skills — quite the opposite, he found them necessary.²⁵ Indeed, Su’s favorite of all painters was Wu Daozi, a student of Zhang Xu and friend of Yan Zhenqing, two masters who revolutionized Chinese calligraphy and visual aesthetics in the early to mid-eighth century, making it more “weighty” and “natural,” and Wu in turn revolutionized Chinese painting by fusing sculptural illusionism to dynamic, calligraphic brushwork in his painting. Wen Fong once quoted Su Shi as writing that “Wu Daozi’s [painted] figures ... seem to walk out of the picture and back into it; they project, can be seen from each side.”²⁶ Fong also quoted Dong You, who wrote that “[Wu’s paintings] are like sculpture. When he paints a face the cheek-bones project, the nose is fleshy, the eyes hollow, the cheeks dimpled.”²⁷

This relationship between painting and sculpture is the second theme taken up in this book. For many art historians, Su Shi’s influence on painting marks the moment when painting first began to become less sculptural and more calligraphic. Yet history is neither linear nor singular, and just as Wu Daozi’s work once showed — more than three hundred years before Su’s time — painting, sculpture, and calligraphy *could* all come together as one. Moreover, as Fong demonstrates in his discussion of

23 Cf. Acker, *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts* 1: 154–55.

24 See Chapter 1, p. 44, in this volume. For Su’s original (never fully translated, as far as I know), see Su Shi, *Dongpo shi ji zhu*, *juan* 27: 22–23.

25 For the usually oversimplified and misleading understanding of Su’s complex views, see Silbergeld, “On the Origins of Literati Painting.”

26 Fong, “Problem of Forgeries,” 107.

27 Fong, “Problem of Forgeries,” 107.

brushwork, calligraphy itself began as simply two-dimensional but became increasingly more three-dimensional, more “sculptural” (and fully so in the generation of Zhang Xu and Wu Daozi). In a type of writing that later came to be known as “seal script” and characterized the practice of brushwork before the third century BCE, the brush was held upright, with the tip following down the center of the stroke, not held sideways nor twisting and turning as it usually would in later times. Seal script was challenging in that it required a perfectly steady arm and hand to produce a perfectly regular mark, unmodulated in its width, without angles, and rounded at the beginning and end of each brushstroke. The marks left by later script types, however, while literally two-dimensional upon a two-dimensional surface, were produced by more assertively three-dimensional movements of the writer’s hand and could easily be read as such by experienced viewers. Thus, over time, calligraphy, too, became increasingly “three-dimensional.” Yet, in discussing inscriptions, which appear on paintings from at least Gu Kaizhi’s time in the late fourth century and which scholar-painters from the fourteenth century onward added extensively to their paintings, some China art historians (most notably, two of Wen Fong’s students²⁸) have come to see this two-dimensional writing practice as contending with, even contradicting, the illusionistic nature of painting — one medium contesting the intention of the other. This could be viewed as signaling the gradual shift in the fundamental intention of later Chinese painting away from mastering representational skills and toward acknowledging the artifice of the media, with an emphasis, instead, on the expressive opportunities offered by the flat surface, many centuries before European painting took a similar turn. The influence of this kind of East Asian brushwork centuries later in modern and postmodern Western painting was something Wen Fong had well in mind, with a special affinity for the later work of Brice Marden, but it lies beyond the life in research described herein.

All the elements discussed in this introduction are present, telescoped, in Wen Fong’s first chapter. Perhaps one needs to come equipped not only with a telescope but also with a microscope to see them there; and that, one might say, is a hallmark of Fong’s teaching style — come prepared! What might seem simple never is, and whatever might seem illogical usually follows a deep inner logic. One must come prepared to leap the gaps and traverse a path more complicated than it seems at first sight. The dedicated traveler will be well rewarded.

28 John Hay, “Poetic Space,” 173–98; for Shou-chien Shih’s contribution to that study, see Hay, 173–76.

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Wen Fong raises still other fundamental issues here that readers might find worthy of pausing to consider. “Because Chinese critical discourse was based on genealogical lineage,” he notes, “traditional art historiography is a history of famous paradigmatic masters only.”²⁹ Thus, even more than modern Western art histories, the Chinese record promulgated a history of exceptionalism, informing readers greatly about the “great” masters, less about “lesser” masters, little, if at all, about typical artists and artistic production, and an absolute minimum about “bad” artists of the kind they disliked, those whose works now lie untouched in museum storage rooms around the globe. (No mention of the fifteenth century or its Zhe school painting appears in this volume.) This differential (or preference) is fairly normal in the academic study of visual arts, literature, and music, with attention assured for abnormal geniuses like Bach and Beethoven but little directed to others like Franz Clement, talented composer and violinist and close friend of Beethoven who influenced that musician’s own work. The classic rationale for this selective approach to history came, belatedly, from Thomas Carlyle in his publication *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, first published in 1841. Some efforts, but still few, have been made to reverse this standard in pursuit of a normative history of Chinese art, about non-elite subjects, women artists, about the production of ordinary images for ordinary people’s ordinary use, and about sales and exchange, the cost of materials, and so forth. All this is made difficult, but not wholly thwarted, by the shortage of available evidence about these subjects.³⁰ Yet in Chapter 5, where Wen Fong revisits his PhD dissertation and his initial application of stylistic analysis to Chinese painting, it was the little-known twelfth-century painters Zhou Jichang and Lin Tinggui who produced the Daitokuji set of one hundred Buddhist luohan scrolls that he chose as the basis for his original methodological demonstration. Looking at a particular moment in time, Fong differentiated which of those two minor and nearly forgotten artists’ hands produced which of the hundred scrolls in that huge project; and at the same time, from an age when representational “naturalism” was still near its peak in Chinese painting history, Fong reveals through careful analysis the schematic conventions that made both of those artists’ work a product of their time and examples of a particular period style.

It is perhaps in Chapter 6 that we encounter most directly Wen Fong’s thoughts on the nature of change in history, particularly in the complex era

29 See Chapter 1, p. 38, in this volume.

30 For example, James Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice*; Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*.

from the fourteenth century on. “History is a record of change,” he asserts, which is neither as simple nor as much a foregone conclusion as it might sound.³¹ He stakes out a position somewhere between that of Max Loehr, articulated in Loehr’s well-known aphorism that “the historian is interested in the inception of styles, not in their perpetuation”³² (we may assuredly take this “interested in... not in...” to mean “*only* interested in”), and that of a social historian like the late Oscar Handlin, who wrote in a manner more compatible with the outlook of traditional Chinese writers, with their strong emphasis on retention and continuity:

The focal point of history’s concerns is continuity, and continuity implies that elements of sameness persist. Although historians must call attention to the mutations, they must emphasize the elements of continuity. And to grant that continuity within change exists leads necessarily to the conclusion that the elements of continuity are the essentials, of mutation, the incidentals.³³

In Chapter 6, Fong introduces the views of Ernst Gombrich on progress and primitivism but then rejects them — that is, he rejects Gombrich’s rejection of primitivism, which formed the basis of revival (*fugu*) and retention in Chinese artistic practice.³⁴ Fong’s purpose, of course, was not to pursue a social history but to invoke a traditional understanding for his dating (in Chapters 4 and 6 alike) of the Kurokawa collection’s Dong Yuan painting as a late work by the master rather than as the simpler, almost childlike and hence earlier work it might otherwise seem to be by a typical (Gombrich-like) Western mode of thinking. And this dating, for Wen Fong, is the key to understanding later Chinese painting history, its change based on a particular cultural inertia or persistence and its “progress” (if that word can be used at all) on a form of archaistic (or primitivist, in Gombrich’s terms) resurgence. Nonetheless, it is hardly the case that Fong introduces Gombrich *only* to reject him. He is, in fact, a great admirer of Gombrich’s explanation of period style in terms of an ongoing series of “schema and correction,” a mechanism that Fong adopted and which became central to his teaching of early Chinese art, before the fourteenth century. But he sees later Chinese art history as post-mimetic and as operating on different

31 See Chapter 6, p. 272, in this volume.

32 Loehr, “Some Fundamental Issues,” 188.

33 Oscar Handlin, personal correspondence with fellow historian Merle Curti, 10 June 1947, in Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 391–92.

34 Gombrich had no taste for the primitive turn taken by the various schools of post-impressionism. For the contrary view, see Fong, “Archaism as a ‘Primitive’ Style.”

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principles that were not so readily susceptible to periodization. Period style itself is a fundamental tenet of connoisseurship yet inherently problematic. The later Chinese practice of *fugu* revivalism in painting certainly offers a particular challenge to the concept, when numerous styles of various periods, both old and new — old *as* new — can all be practiced at the same time. Zhao Mengfu, a painter from early in the later historical era whom Wen Fong views as Chinese art history's most pivotal artist, could within a relatively short time paint such an encyclopedic array of works as seen in his *The Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu* at Princeton, *Twin Pines, Level Distance* at the Metropolitan Museum, *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* at the National Palace Museum, Taipei, and *Water Village* in the Palace Museum, Beijing. Attempting to definitively sequence these four paintings stylistically, without the benefit of external documentation, might tame the pride of any connoisseur, Chinese or Western; attempting to discern an inner logic to this sequence would tax the capacity of any art historian.

One articulation of what Wen Fong regards as the “crisis” in art history today,³⁵ and representative of a younger generation's alertness to the practical limits of connoisseurial progress and approaching that enterprise in terms of any one-dimensional schema such as period style, recently appeared in the Festschrift published in Fong's honor:

All of these [art historical sequences] are erected, of necessity, by means of informed speculation, and all of them are provisional. The successive stages in the development of Chinese landscape painting are not like the succession of the English kings. They are hypothetical and schematic constructions, not historical facts.... There is more than one story of Chinese painting, and it takes more than one structure to order the realized possibilities of ink and color on silk and paper. After all, these objects hold our fascination because they do more than one thing at one time and they do many more things over time.³⁶

And yet, anyone who would expect the connoisseurially oriented Wen Fong to reject this view out-of-hand might be surprised. Rather, one will find him quite prepared to participate in the “relativist and therefore post-historical” exercise by tracing the “cultural biography” of early paintings

35 Fong, “Why Chinese Painting Is History,” 258.

36 Bickford, “Visual Evidence Is Evidence,” 90–91.

to demonstrate their repetitive impact on the painters and paintings of later generations.³⁷

Chapters 2 and 4 are concerned with the need to understand “the masterpiece,” the “founding paradigms” in a culture that revered its canonized masters and their masterpieces and that closely fashioned its styles and standards upon theirs. One of the things to be understood is how authentic masterworks come gradually, historically, to be replaced by a more fluid concept of these masters and their work. Nevertheless, the burden of the historian is to recover, or at least refashion, historical originality from the mound of derivation. The paradigmatic subjects of these two chapters are two revered early painters whose well-defined lives (“afterlives”) are well enough formed in the Chinese art-historical imagination for them to tell us about the values and forces by which that imagination is shaped. The first of these two is the figure painter Gu Kaizhi; Fong wishes to show how “the meaning of Gu Kaizhi always depended on the eye of the beholder rather than the object itself at the point of its creation,” and among the beholders were later artists under whose brushes Gu was periodically reborn, like Li Gonglin, who introduced Gu’s figure-and-drapery style to paper with a technique referred to as *baimiao*, “white writing” or “plain writing.” By introducing Gu Kaizhi of the fourth century as the earliest paradigm for the figure painter and introducing Gu’s brushwork (“gossamer”-like and “complete”) in terms of calligraphy appropriate for use by the scholar-painter, Li also introduced what was meant by “early” when it came to revivalist or restorative phases in Chinese painting: with Gu Kaizhi, early didn’t mean tinged with primitivism or fully charged by some wild savagery but rather exhibiting a controlled, civilized elegance that one can hardly resist calling “classical.” Still later revivalists of the Gu Kaizhi tradition, like Zhao Mengfu and Chen Hongshou, brought their own contributions to the ever-growing range of post–Gu Kaizhi conventions, which it is in the nature of paradigmatic masters to stimulate in others and to make room for through the adaptability of their own work. The other artist of this monumental pair is the landscape painter Dong Yuan, who became a prototype and a model for “artists during the critical Song-Yuan transition in the late thirteenth century [who] similarly felt that they had reached a cul-de-sac in the mastery of *xingsi*, or ‘form-likeness’”).³⁸ It is from the preferences and priorities of Dong Yuan’s following that Fong forms his own impression about the trajectory of Dong’s work: not progressing over time from simple

37 See Chapters 2 and 4 in this volume.

38 See Chapters 2 and 6 in this volume.

INTRODUCTION

to complex but the other way around, from the rendering of complex shapes and naturalistic textures to using simple shapes and brushwork as in calligraphy. Dong's mature work was a "return" (復) — like Li Gonglin's return to the "archaic linear" of Gu Kaizhi, except that there was no earlier master for Dong to return to, and he had to establish his own paradigm, based only on simplicity and pure, "primitive" brushwork itself, lines and dots.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 apply these same methodological principles more broadly to the closing period in traditional Chinese painting history, where Fong observes how the early Qing court, by co-opting the stylistic tradition of Dong Qichang and his followers and their posthumously claimed and sanctified forebears to produce a kind of court-approved "orthodoxy," amplified the appeal in later times, from the mid-seventeenth century into the twentieth century, of an even more individualistic set of byways traveled by Shitao, Bada Shanren, and others. Shitao was himself a model of "returning," and his brushwork defines the other end of the spectrum from Gu Kaizhi in the various "primitive" antiquities to which the revivalist can choose to return. If a return to Gu Kaizhi like Li Gonglin's wrote a new chapter in simplicity, Shitao's return was to a nameless, masterless, non-anthropomorphic "chaos," which he claimed the painter must harness and bring under control in order to master his art. But however far apart the ends of the spectrum of brushwork used in painting were separated, from Gu Kaizhi to Shitao, the alternative to illustration established by post-illusionist Chinese painters from the later eleventh century on was reckoned (distinct from anything used in European reckoning) in terms of calligraphic brushwork, from plain to complex, from tame to wildly energetic, from human in personality and proportions to cosmic in concept, and increasingly conventionalized, codified, and nominalized over time.

Chapter 8, which closes this volume, brings Wen Fong's methodology to bear on painting of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by revisiting the earliest of his major journal articles, from 1959.³⁹ In that study, he brought his methodological scrutiny to bear on the question of authenticity in Chinese painting and demonstrated how badly history itself can be distorted by the use of textual inscriptions on paintings that have not been subjected to a rigorous stylistic analysis. Still in his late twenties at the time, Fong gained international attention in the field by radically revising the chronology of the early Qing painter Shitao (by then the most popular Chinese literati painter among the Japanese, and now in America as well) and by clarifying Shitao's personal relationship to his royal cousin

39 Fong, "A Letter from Shih-t'ao."

Bada Shanren. Fong's success at this depended on his unmasking the twentieth-century painter Zhang Daqian (then still very much alive and in his prime of activity, and who recently, posthumously, became the highest earning painter in the world at international auctions) as the greatest Chinese forger of all time (see also Chapter 4). Here, Wen Fong discusses the two artists he considers the best of the younger generation and his reasons for attaching them to Zhang's legacy (it has nothing to do with forgery!). He was able to lay out only a rough sketch of this final chapter, and it was left to me, having had the privilege of working closely with him throughout my own time as his successor at Princeton, to ascertain his intentions and, mostly in my own words, to bring them to completion.

I have titled this introduction "Calligraphy, Sculpture, and Painting are One, But Sometimes Two or Three" in reference to painting's shifting alliances, primarily with sculpture throughout much of the first millennium, and with calligraphy throughout much of the past millennium, as characterized by Wen Fong. In addition to these and all the other issues mentioned so far, there is a good deal more in this book. Naturally, readers are encouraged to look and to think for themselves, as that is the prime goal of good teaching. Much of the appeal of Chinese painting lies beneath the surface, requiring deep thought. That is, essentially, how I see and recommend this book: there is always more to Wen Fong's thought and writing than meets the eye.